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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000418

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, FEBRUARY 28 - MARCH 6

ASTANA 00000418 001.3 OF 002

¶1. This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

KAZAKHSTANI PILGRIMS TO MARCH FROM ASTANA TO MECCA

¶2. In April, 48 Kazakhstanis will participate in the first ever march from Astana to Mecca. The "Nur Zholy," a march of "peace and accord," will be dedicated to the Third Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions which will take place in Astana this year.

The pilgrims will walk 7,007 km through seven countries in 200 days. The goal of the march is to "spread information about the history, culture, traditions and achievements of Kazakhstan, and also to elevate Kazakhstan's role in promoting international peace."

To promote their country, the organizers are planning photo exhibitions about Kazakhstan in the 11 cities that the pilgrims plan to walk through.

DEFRAUDED INVESTORS SEEKING TO REMOVE CONSTRUCTION BOSS

¶3. Would-be residents of apartment blocks that have not yet been built by KUAT Corporation, once Kazakhstan's largest construction company, collected more than 20,000 signatures in a drive to strip the company's chairman, Oleg Nam, of his mandate as a deputy of the Almaty maslikhat (local legislative body). Like other Kazakhstani construction companies, KUAT pre-sold thousands of apartments in apartment buildings whose construction has not been finished or has not even started. As the global credit crisis hit Kazakhstan in 2007, the construction sector froze and many Kazakhstanis who put their life savings into unfinished apartments found themselves without their money and without apartments.

¶4. Last month, Kazakhstan's financial police accused KUAT's top managers of large-scale embezzlement and began criminal proceedings against several unnamed executives. Ever since the problems of the

construction sector became known, angry "dolshiki" (individuals who bought pre-sold apartments) have called for Nam's resignation from Almaty's maslikhat. These calls intensified since the charges against KUAT became official in February, and so far have culminated in a petition drive to remove Nam from his post that has attracted more than 20,000 signatures. "We plan to deliver the signatures to the local election committee, along with a letter urging the stripping of Oleg Nam's mandate. We will also deliver the signatures to Almaty's maslikhat." Nam himself said that the only people with a right to dismiss him from his position are his voters. "They have elected me, and it will be their decision or their right to revoke (my mandate)," he said.

DEDICATED CENSUS WORKERS REACH AN UNDERGROUND COMMUNITY

¶ 15. Census workers in the Pavlodar region discovered a community of twenty people living on a island in "zemlyankas" -- underground dwellings dug into the ground without electricity, running water and other luxuries of modern civilization. Officially, the island in the middle of the Irtysh river is uninhabited. "You can only get there by boat in the summer, or across the ice in the winter," local officials said. Local officials discovered the settlement during a helicopter flight last summer, when they surveyed the local area, which is under environmental protection. Kazakhstani census officials promised to account for everyone, including "foreigners and bums," in this year's census. Pavlodar census workers more than contributed to this effort. Despite the fact that their car broke down on the way and they had to walk more than three kilometers, they safely made their way into the settlement "even though they were unable to reach everyone."

OPEN-AIR MEAT MARKETS

ASTANA 00000418 002.3 OF 002

¶ 16. The akimat (government administration) of Zhambyl oblast has organized a weekend meat market on the main square of Taraz, the oblast's capital and one of the largest cities in southern Kazakhstan. The meat market, which according to local residents was launched immediately after the tenge devaluation, appears to be rather ad-hoc. People sell meat out of the trunks of their cars and butcher it on the spot. Hunks of meat sit on top of cars, inside trunks, or lie on the ground. This rather messy business is conducted against the backdrop of a beautifully restored square in what EmbOff describes as by far the nicest part of the city. "The juxtaposition of huge, bloody hunks of meat right in the middle of it was a bit of a shock," she says.

¶ 17. A similar meat market has been started in Shymkent -- this one is located across the street from the Mega Center mall -- prime commercial real estate. This development came a year after Shymkent's akim (mayor) decided to move the city's main bazaar, reportedly because he wanted Shymkent to look "modern." "And now they have an ad hoc outdoor slaughterhouse on the doorstep of the Mega Center," EmbOff reports.

"BUY AMERICAN CHICKEN LEGS"

¶ 18. Last month, a member of the Pavlodar maslikhat (local legislature), Askar Bakhralinov, told the press that a large batch of American chicken legs, allegedly produced and frozen more than 30 years ago, was released from U.S. army reserves and brought onto Kazakhstan's markets. The Central Asia representative of the U.S. Poultry and Egg Export Council, Bella Ablayeva, responded that the Council was disturbed by efforts to disseminate such rumors. She was convinced that someone tried to slander the quality of U.S. produce. Ablayeva said that all poultry produced in the United States goes through thorough quality control. American companies value their image and export only quality produce. According to Ablayeva, the story is an absurd lie aimed at reducing the competitiveness of American produce. An official at the Committee of State Epidemic Control in Almaty, Olga Asayeva, confirmed that U.S. chicken legs go through strict controls in both the United States and Kazakhstan, and her department has never received any complaints about the quality of American chicken legs. "The product is of good quality and there are no reasons to worry. Don't listen

to rumors. Buy American chicken legs," Asayeva said.

HOAGLAND